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The Spiritual Leader's Guide to Self-Care

Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley

Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2002

225 pages, \$24.00 Softcover

This is a resourceful, timely and important book written by a Lutheran clergy couple. They candidly acknowledge that “we have spent many years struggling to care for ourselves and our family while faithfully attending to our duties as parish pastors. It is an ongoing struggle.” (Preface) Indeed, self-care is that – an ongoing struggle!

I regard this text as an essential sequel to Roy Oswald's excellent *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (1991). In fact, Oswald has written the Foreword for this valuable resource. Says Oswald: “Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley offer us a real gift in this book, a tool for thinking about what is required of a spiritual guide. In a practical way, they invite us to examine this ‘being’ side of our life and role and invite us into a more holistic way of being a spiritual leader.”

The text is helpfully organized into 52 weeks of exercises, including 6 retreat weeks. The authors note that while they advocate doing the weekly exercises, the schedule needs to be adaptive to meet each person's particular needs. The same holds true for the suggested retreats. Each regular week contains these emphases: “connecting with yourself,” “connecting with a partner,” “connecting with God,” and taking up a “challenge.” As I worked my way through the text's exercises, I found myself giving an affirmative nod in appreciation for the active engagement each exercise constituted for me. Each “retreat week” includes a number of suggested movies and videos, books (some fiction and some non-fiction) and a variety of activities enabling the three connections as well as providing a focus on challenges.

I must confess that I experienced this book as much more than a book. It is like a “manual” inviting me into the strength of someone coaching my spiritual life. It is a creative resource to be used to enhance both personal life and ministry. Integrated into each set of exercises are the three “connections” – with self, with a partner and with God – as well as a specific challenge to take up.

There are six sections to this resourceful and visionary text. They are: *Creating a Life Vision*, *Caring for Yourself at Work*, *Nurturing your Relationships*, *Caring for your Physical and Material Needs*,

Caring for your Spiritual and Intellectual Needs, and *Sustaining a Life Vision*. Each section is deeply grounded in pastoral and leadership realities and experiences. Easy to connect with – yet engagingly growthful and challenging! A theme prevalent throughout is what the authors put forward as “cultivating delight.”

One may get the impression that this text has a focus strictly on the personal; not so. While that is certainly an intentional emphasis, the focus is really on connectedness, a *holistic* connectedness. In fact, the text can also be used to encourage congregants and congregations to move their lives toward greater wholeness through the practices of self-examination and self-affirmation. Many of the exercises include collaborative peer processes for engaging in reflection.

I also want to underscore the excellent annotated bibliography – 25 pages in total – of additional resources to pursue, including web sites related to the multitude of topics covered by the authors.

Today there are many people searching for a spirituality which not only touches but which also meets their personal and communal yearnings and needs for meaningful connectedness and relationships. This text includes processes, exercises and resources that can both aid and enhance that connectedness. This is a soul-companion that I recommend highly to clergy, lay leaders, seminary students – all who are interested in and concerned about the well-being of persons-in-relation with self, with others and with God. What I found particularly gripping is that the exercises did not feel like another duty; on the contrary, they felt like an invitation into the manifold graces of God.

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